DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 342 567 RC 018 520

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TITLE Rural America--Learn Your History or Repeat It: A Three Legged Stool Doesn't Tip Over.
PUB DATE 17 Mar 91
NOTE 12p.; In: Reaching Our Potential: Rural Education in the 90's. Conference Proceedings, Rural Education Symposium (Nashville, TN, March 17-20, 1991); see RC 018 473.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Economic Development; Elementary Secondary Education; *Rural Areas; Rural Development; Rural Education; *Rural Urban Differences; *School Community Relationship; Social Problems; Social Theories; United States History

ABSTRACT

Rural people in their environment have the necessary attributes to successfully endure and survive those trials that would lead to urban decline. As societal problems require increased investment in existing institutions, the growing complexity eventually yields a lower level of benefits or returns. Urban problems such as hunger, homelessness, and crowding mirror events taking place in Third World countries. City dwellers command a disproportionate share of society's financial and natural resources and generate a disproportionate share of its wastes. Historically, rural America has benefitted from the continuity of home, school, and community as opposed to the fragmentation of urban life. Rural replication of fragmented urban institutions such as schools and welfare agencies may become counterproductive to the rural community. Economic development efforts in rural areas should involve young people and promote increased involvement and pride in the community. Increased economic opportunity should provide substantial reasons and means for youth to remain in rural areas as productive adults. Rural development efforts should involve: (1) carefully examining urban problems; (2) exploring, defining, and emphasizing the positive qualities of rural places; and (3) exploring school and community options that take advantage of developing scarcities and new technologies to provide decentralized services. (KS)

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ED342567

NRSSC PRESENTATION
Presenter: Carl Seiter
Co-Presenter:
Day: March 17, 1991
Time: 10:30am - 12:00pm

Rural America--Learn Your History or Repeat It

(A Three Legged Stool Doesn't Tip Over)

RC018520

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RURAL AMERICA - LEARN YOUR HISTORY OR REPEAT IT

(A THREE LEGGED STOOL DOESN'T TIP OVER)

A NEW BOGEYMAN FOR AMERICA - COMPLEXITY

The research to date is clear. Civilizations are fragile, impermanent, temporal things. The roadside of history is littered with the dead remains of bygone societies. That a civilization can rise and fall is not at all a new idea but it is one that we, in the United States, have not entertained with ourselves in mind. Somehow we see ourselves as on top of an unending crest of increasing attainment and accomplishment. To even consider that such success could ever end has only recently come into our conversation. Recent social theory outlines most of the tenets for the collapse of complex societies. The most recent of these examines social and institutional complexity (Tainter, 1988). I firmly believe rural people in their environment have the necessary attributes to successfully endure and survive those trials that would bring urban life to its knees. In the past, urban decline and collapse has dragged the rural sector down with it. Now, the dynamics of collapse are better understood and rural America need not repeat history. Collapse happens to very large, highly complex social systems. Rural society can be more adaptable and elastic.

We can witness this process in action right now in the Soviet system today. At the same time, while some societies are in the process of dis-integrating* other Third World nations are struggling to attain that same complexity and modernity that now threatens highly complex and industrialized societies (Brown & Jacobson, 1986).

The centuries-long climb to reach the condition of the modern state with its science and technology, its consumer-focused population, its extravagant use of energy and scarce resources is often balanced by an equal descent and decline back

* The term disintegrating in our lexicon all too often carries an implied explosive, violent, and untimely end. It is not meant that this connotation be applied here. To dis-integrate here is to reverse the process of "integration"; that parts of an assembly become disassociated, reducing the overall complex nature of the existing order. An example is the dissolution of parts of the Soviet Union and East European Bloc. There can be considerable benefits to such an arrangement under certain circumstances.

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towards simpler conditions of equilibrium. The time on top, on the crest of the wave, for America or any other industrialized nation, could well be brief if the dynamics of complexity remain unexamined and allowed to continue unchecked.

If we assume that in America, we are immune to the dynamics experienced by other societies throughout history, we blind ourselves to the possibility that we are doing much to hasten the process of decline or collapse for ourselves. Brown and Jacobson (1986) document the condition of many countries risking entrapment on the ascending side of the "wave" who may never attain the crest. Conversely, the attempted breakup of the Soviet Baltic States and/or the Eastern European ethnic unrest we witness may be harbingers of a descent on the far side of the wave for these European regions.

Before a case can be made for a path to rural revival, it may help to more closely examine some of the sources for our present difficulties. These can be found in the archeological literature.

Humans, who seek to act rationally, band together in populations to make use of sources of food, water, energy, and raw materials that are essential for their survival. These pursuits require cooperative efforts that eventually develop into routinized and institutionalized ways of behaving. Having created a socio-political system made up of institutions we call society, humans must continue to invest money, talent, time, energy, and natural resources into the continuing maintenance and development of their institutions (Tainter, 1988).

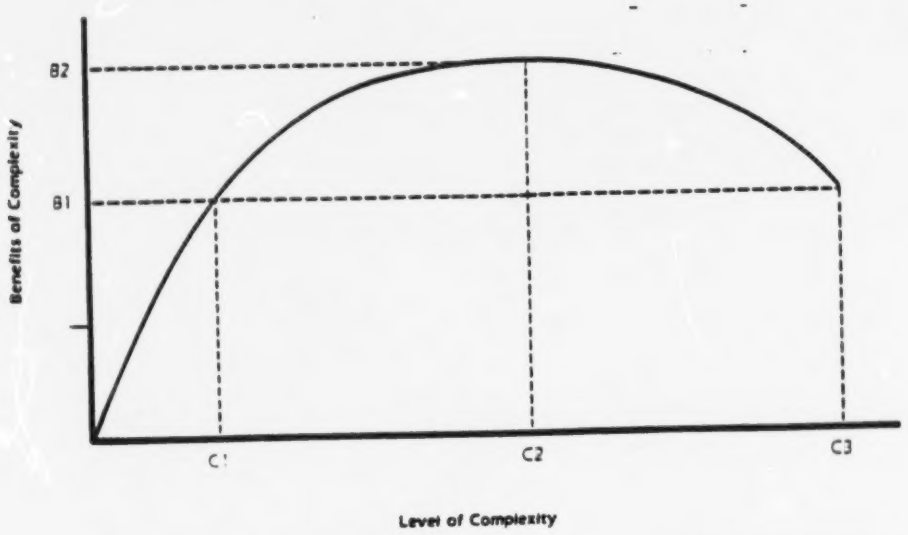
As new problems emerge to face a society, the sociopolitical response requires <u>increased investment</u> in the existing institutions merely to preserve the status quo. This investment takes the form of the increasing size of bureaucracies, increasing specialization of bureaucracies, and <u>cumulative</u> organizational solutions...ie. when something works, it is maintained (kept alive and funded) until the next time it may be needed. For example, at one time there was no FBI, no IRS, no welfare system, because they, and countless other local, state, and federal agencies, were not needed.

In Figure 1. considerable benefits have accrued to the society at B1/C1 as a result of increased complexity but decrease thereafter. By time B3/C3 is reached, there is abundant complexity but at considerable cost to the society yet with decreased overall benefits. Indeed, the benefits at B3/C3 are the same as they were earlier at B1/C1 and at much lower levels of investment.

Thus while the <u>initial</u> investment in growing complexity may be a rational solution to real and perceived problems, that happy state of affairs cannot be sustained. As the least costly solutions for societal problems are progressively exhausted, any further growth in complexity must be met by more costly responses. The point is eventually reached where continued investment

in complexity does not give a proportionate return. The return on investments in complexity begins to shrink, gradually at first and then with acceleration. Take for example our investment in science. Modern science has become less productive overall because it has become complex, specialized, and very expensive. We no longer make scientific progress by flying a kite in a thunderstorm or looking at pond water through a simple microscope. As the easier questions are investigated and resolved, science moves inevitably to more complex areas of exploration and to larger and more expensive organizations. Today we have NASA and sub-atomic particle accelerators costing billions. Sadly, the same argument obtains for education. A society in this condition has reached the phase where it is increasingly vulnerable to collapse (Tainter, 1988).

Fig 1. Benefits as a Function of Complexity



after Tainter, 1988.

Complexity becomes the wedge that begins to break up the mortar in the functional structure of our society's institutions. The increasing costs in financing, training people, implementing and maintaining new functions and upgraded old ones (such as are delegated to schools) cost a great deal but often yield little benefit to society in proportion to the cost. It would appear that the more successfully a young institution does its "own thing", the greater become the chances that later on it will deliver less and less on its intended mission to the supporting society - yet it will cost more merely to keep it in a state of equilibrium. This happens because it becomes internally so complex that further development or delivery of services become inordinately difficult or expensive. Hence our own malfunctioning institutions become the very source or some of our most debilitating difficulties. Cities manifest this dynamic in many ways.

Complex societies are new in human history and any anticipated decline or collapse need not be an uncontrolled free-fall to some primative condition, but rather a return to the more normal historical human condition and experience of lower complexity. The idea that collapse is an unprecedented catastrophe is not the point here. Collapse or decline can become highly utilitarian and necessary to restore the benefits of an earlier and simpler organizational structure that once served the society so very well. When increasing investment in complexity begins to yield little or no benefits (other than to its own continued existance), a return to simpler organizational conditions (collapse to many people) becomes an economizing process. Under such conditions, collapse may be the most appropriate response a society can have. For the vast majority of rural populations who have had minimal benefit from the existing high degree of urban complexity, this may appear as a very rational process with considerable appeal.

THIRD WORLD COUNTRIES: A MIRROR IMAGE OF FUTURE AMERICA?

Obscured in the research on understanding how nations develop are some cryptic warnings for rural America. There are developments taking place here, in this country, that mirror some events in third-world countries. If the dynamics remain unchanged, the outcomes in other lands may have an unwelcome message for we Americans. These appear to be:

1. Do not assume that we could never, by some sequence of events, succumb to the conditions of man-made drought and desertification; increasing hunger and widespread homelessness that creates very large numbers of migratory environmental refugees, and a general decline towards third world status.

2. Twentieth century cities are a phenomenon rising from the technological changes and availability of vast energy supplies of the last century. Cities command a disproportionate share of society's resources and create a disproportionate share of society's wastes . Mexico city, for example, cannot provide goods and services to the nation adequate to offset its drain on Mexico's national resources. Hence the city has become a liability to the entire country (Brown & Jaocobson, 1987).

3. America's demographic structure is increasingly dominated by young people and most of them from the minority groups. These young people put increasing pressure on social institutions and may eventually populate the ranks of the unemployed. Forecasts warn that educational systems will become inundated with new students and this flux of youth may overwhelm some city school systems making a mockery of compulsory attendance let alone meaningful education (De Vita, 1989).

4. Another neglected area of research that applies to the deteriorating cities of America is how crowding contributes to conflict. "Crowding does provide a set of conditions, a context in which tension, violence, and various forms of aberrant beha-

vior are more likely to occur". Crowding, coupled with competition for jobs, may exacerbate long-standing racial, religious, and ethnic differences. "The basic ingredients for internal political conflict and civil strife are in place. An economic slowdown induced by rising external debt, rising numbers of unemployed youth, and a highly skewed income distribution seem certain to breed social tensions and increasing unrest". That passage was written about Mexico. Do you find any reason that it is not also true of urban America? (Brown, et al. p 27-28).

LISTEN UP RURAL AMERICA

Rural America might well examine these developments because when solutions are seriously needed in this country for many of our emerging urban difficulties, it is only the rural place that remains as a physical buffer, an "out-back", a place for retreat from the pressing problems of the urban place. It will be perceived as a resource possibly very useful in the resolution of these vast urban problems. Sadly, politicians will likely favor continuing support and development of the urban over the rural. That is where the votes are and remains the locus of their power. Yet they might also regard the rural place as a good "dumping ground" or exploitable resource to address many of their urban ills. Exactly <u>how</u> this will occur is not clear. It is already clear that urban centers see rural America as a good place to dump their garbage. In any case, there may be a strong and increasing effort from urban leaders to continue exploitation of rural people and their environment.

For the last several millennia, world population has been rural. As late as 1900, only 14 percent of the world's population lived in cities. Changes in technology and the ready availability of vast energy supplies fueled the urbanization we now observe. Coal, replacing firewood, was in turn replaced by oil. Oil enabled cities to extend their supply lines and draw food and other raw materials from very distant points. Cheap oil and economic policies favoring industrial development led to the surge in urban growth.

But today, city dwellers, now some 43 percent of the world's population, command a disproportionate share of society's financial and natural resources and generate a disproportionate share of its wastes. Preferential urban policies and subsidies make food and other basic goods cheaper in the city discouraging agricultural development thus attracting people to urban areas. When, in Poland, Egypt, and other places, their food subsidy bubble was broken and urban dwellers were required to pay the <u>actual costs</u> of their food, there were serious food riots.

In the spring of 1989 Wall, et al, presented a short piece, that captured with dreadful clarity, what rural America is enduring. They fictionalized a small town gradually dying as "progress" swallowed what few measures of stability it once enjoyed. While reading Wendell Berry (whose books should be in the center of all rural bookshelves) I found he quoted Thomas Jefferson to

good effect. "Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country, and wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting bonds." Conversely, Jefferson also wrote, "I consider the class of artificers as the panders of vice, and the instruments by which the liberties of a country are generally overturned." Berry believes by "artificers" Jefferson meant manufacturers and he made no distinction between "management" and "labor" (Berry, 1977: p143).

Of course these same rural "cultivators of the earth" get married, raise families, and often choose to stay "tied to their country, and wedded to its liberty...", for very personal and profound reasons. But when we introduce the last 100 years of social, scientific, and technological progress into the equation, we see this way of life to be in serious jeopardy.

What I propose is that the very continuity of rural life may require rural people to become those same "artificers" of whom Jefferson spoke so disparagingly. When a community watches its young people fail to succeed in school and fail to enjoy the success they might have had, surely it breaks their hearts. And yet to attack only this dimension of the problem may be to mistakenly isolate schooling problems from the many others that likely afflict any small, rural community. If city folk choose to fragment their lives and experiences into small slices that occur in isolated places called institutions, we should let them. Problems facing rural communities today are multi-dimensional and a one-dimensional approach with schooling alone may not accomplish what is intended. Such a direct linear attack on the needs of at-risk youth may only replicate the mistakes of the cities. The historical strength of the rural community was the <u>absence</u> of the artificial divisions in their lives and activities found in such abundance in urban life. In rural America there was a continuity from dawn to dusk, from home to community, from person to group, from work to play. When rural places emmulate the urban ways, they tend to disengage from these traditional sources of rural strength and continuity.

This is why I argue that the small-scale rural replication of various urban institutions such as schools, welfare agencies, economic activities, etc, <u>all working in isolation from one another</u>, may become counterproductive and divisive where a more community-wide approach may succeed. Consider this letter. "We're an isolated rural community with a large underemployed population. We think we should be doing more to combat our problems, but we don't know where to start"; or this one, "Our community engages in a lot of finger pointing. Cultural, church, and civic groups all blame each other for our problems: drugs, absentee landlords, rubble-strewn vacant lots. How can we get over this hump?" (The Regeneration Project, 1987).

A community of this sort might <u>not</u> be a place where a good student and eventual high school graduate would choose to remain as an adult or return to after college graduation. Nor is it

likely a community in which other less able, at-risk, students can easily take pride. Community members might come together to make some serious decisions. These decisions should revolve around new and emerging opportunities for economic development and the young people should be allowed to participate in this dialogue. If and when these economic developments materialize, the youth should again be allowed to participate in wage-earning. When this economic activity involves learning or schooling, the youth should again be first in line.

So this is the first order of business: to generate a community energy and enthusiasm that captivates the imaginations of everyone - especially the youth - a community that elicits pride from all its citizens.

SHOULD SCHOOLS BECOME INVOLVED IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT?

SHOULD ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INVOLVE THE SCHOOLS?

Such youthful participation in serious community matters is indeed an alternative intervention and schools can and should be deeply involved. The genesis of alternative intervention services for rural, at-risk youth should involve the entire community in ways that promote increased **involvement** and **pride** in the community for everyone, especially the youth. Few urban citizens profess great pride their city. Detroit has had to push a "Love Detroit" program rather hard. Pride in a rural community would not be so difficult when it is not contrived, fabricated and directed by the public relations arm of the mayor's office.

Any increased economic opportunity should again include the youth and provide **substantial reasons** and **means** for youth to remain in their hometowns or rural areas as productive adults rather than fleeing to the large cities where their prognosis is not good! Our youth need good reasons for staying or returning home!

If we permit these alternative intervention services to be the sole province of some agency, school district, or other single institutional entity, we levy a burden that is not lightly carried and could run the risk of failing to deliver on its intended mission. Moreover, such intervention programs may come to require continuous funding at a time when fiscal resources are becoming very scarce. Institutional complexity should be avoided.

This proposal urges the entire community be involved in any major intervention program for at-risk youth. It would integrate many community dimensions and become quite comprehensive. Under these conditions, funding becomes less an issue since the activities proposed here can be self-supporting. It might be said that funding is internal and eternal allowing the students for whom intervention has been successful to remain in the community as adults and carry on the program to assist the next generation of

similar youth.

The first part of this effort is not at all new. It starts with examining the local economic structure to identify economic needs, and explore ways of regenerating or enhancing the local economy but with a new wrinkle in part, to take advantage, though not cynically, of urban difficulties. These at-risk youth, indeed all youth, might come to feel they have a stake in the outcome of this effort to enhance the local economy. They should be invited to become full participants in the planning, implementation, and fruits of any economic developments.

Another major part of this effort may indeed be new. All rural citizens should become well-schooled on what cities are all about...that the glamour, the wealth, the adventure, and opportunity stand side by side with poverty, illness, homelessness, stress, danger, and failed dreams. The equation must remain balanced: for all the positive attributes to be found in the large urban place there is also an equal and opposite measure of the negative. Incorporate this recognition with the reality that many cities now face difficulties from which some of them may never emerge, and most sensible youth may choose to make their stand in the rural place. The allure of the city must be balanced with an understanding of the reality of the city. A major part of this effort must include a searching examination of the merits of the rural environment and its people in spite of the indifference and neglect shown from state and national leaders.

THE THREE LEGGED STOOL OF RURAL SUCCESS

Leg One: Evasive Action: Carefully Examine Urban Problems.

A large portion of the emerging economic health of the rural place could have its genesis in taking advantage of the developing scarcities and difficulties that face the urban place. For example, to provide space for trash, to develop and build efficient recylcling facilities, to develop new products and uses for these recycled materials, to develop appropriate technology for controlled and monitored environments that do help the cities dispose of their trash and perhaps even their toxic wastes. Involving youth in an educational/business partnership in this context is not the same as in urban experiments. This point is very important! In this scenario, the students' education must contain curriculum and experience that ensures whatever enterprise they choose to share, it must be sustainable over the very long term. They must come to understand that much of current American business and industry is on a path that cannot be sustained when energy and resources become very scarce or very serious environmental issues. The public and private values that accompany affluence and mass consumption must be carefuly examined and allowed to compete with those that promote long-term economic, social, and environmental stability. There is no point to raising children with unrealistic expectations of the future or to pursue styles of economic activity already shown to be

bankrupt of any long-term sustainablity. Many parents in America now feel that their children will not have as "good" a life as they have had. What constitutes the "good" life is a very valid question for the classroom. If one looks at the world through muddy brown glasses the world will appear muddy brown. If one looks at the world through rosy pink glasses the world will appear rosy pink. The metaphor refers to one's values and perceptions. What we observe to be a declining urban society with a sinking "American Dream" might really be an unprecedented opportunity to change glasses and see things in a new perspective...perhaps a rural one but surely a sustainable one.

The large urban places may be incapable of making such changes in their economic views and activites and if not, they may soon grind to a halt. But this is no reason for rural places to repeat urban mistakes. This is an opportunity to implement environmentally sound and people-sensitive economic activities that can be found in the appropriate literature such as, "Small is Beautiful", "Appropriate Technology" and so forth.

Leg Two: "**Man the Barricades:**
Carefully Examine Rural Attributes..take **REAL** stock of what you already have and **protect** it.

Having examined cities very carefully and perhaps deciding that this is no way or place to live, it is time to extoll the virtues of rural living and be wary of urban motives for rural exploitation. This is not to mean that rural completely turns its back on the urban but that it must be very wary and suspicious of the motives of urban policy makers who approach rural leaders with proposals that might result in further exploitation and degradation. Urban planners do not have the best interests of the rural place at heart when they plan - when did you last hear of a rural planner employed by the city? However, there must be a willingness of rural to help urban, but let it cost them (the cities that is).

To balance the study of cities, explore, define, document and emphasize the positive qualities that rural places have to offer. This dialogue must take place in both the schools and in the public forum. All citizens should engage in this exploration of their collective future and all must come to feel they have a role and a stake in the outcome. Intense discussions might examine all of the pros and cons of both urban and rural environments so all citizens can explore and compare for themselves. This kind of dialogue probably cannot occur in an urban environment because each person, group, or institution is engaged in its own isolated and fragmented activities that separate it from others...where each group is locked into a survival mode with an indifference or disregard for the others.

Massive social dislocations are very probable events for our youth in the not-distant future. With the right dialogue and action, not only can the rural place survive, but it might prevail.

Leg Three: Turn 'Despair' into 'Repair':
Carefully Explore School/Community/Economic Options...take advantage of developing scarcities and new technologies to provide decentralized services for yourselves and the cities.

The role of the school might now include being a broker uniting diverse parts of the community in the development of low-tech economic activites and industries through vocational programs that take economic advantage of the urban problems. For example, develop programs that recycle for the cities, manufacture with those recycled materials, design low-tech manufacture of "appropriate technology" for sale in other rural places, etc. Use electronic communication to provide services for the cities from the rural community. See that the youth are deeply involved in this enterprise. One can expect this fosters pride in the community; that it stimulates a desire to stay in that community and succeed in the rural place rather than being sucked into cities. This could boost the economic health of the area and integrate many of the earlier forces that once held rural places together in the first place... a time when there was little differentiation between work/play/community.

There is much social change that has occurred with the development of cities that has not been in the best interests of humankind. Setting aside some of these developments may help restore pride and control over one's rural life experiences and restore rural community health to its citizens.

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